



THE LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES  
DEMONSTRATION

# Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Reading

An Impact Study at  
Hillsborough Community College

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JUNE 2010

Executive Summary



National Center for Postsecondary Research  
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## Executive Summary

# Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Reading

An Impact Study at Hillsborough Community College

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**June 2010**



**National Center for Postsecondary Research**

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## Overview

Over the last four decades, community colleges have played an increasingly important role in higher education. Today, community colleges enroll more than one in every three undergraduates nationally. Unfortunately, among students who enroll in community colleges with the intent to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution, only 51 percent achieve that goal within six years. Many postsecondary institutions operate *learning communities* to improve low rates of success. Basic learning communities simply co-enroll a cohort of students into two classes together. More comprehensive learning communities include additional components: The courses have integrated curricula, instructors collaborate closely, and student services such as enhanced advising and tutoring can be embedded, among other approaches.

This report presents results from a rigorous random assignment study of a basic learning community program at Hillsborough Community College in Tampa Bay, Florida. Hillsborough is one of six community colleges participating in the National Center for Postsecondary Research's Learning Communities Demonstration. The demonstration's focus is on determining whether learning communities are an effective strategy for helping students who need developmental education. Hillsborough's learning communities co-enrolled groups of around 20 students into a developmental reading course and a "college success" course. Three cohorts of students (fall 2007, spring 2008, and fall 2008) participated in the study, for a total of 1,071. The findings show that:

- The most salient feature of the learning communities implemented at Hillsborough was the co-enrollment of students into linked courses, creating student cohorts.
- The learning communities at Hillsborough became more comprehensive over the course of the study. In particular, curricular integration and faculty collaboration were generally minimal at the start of the study, but increased over time.
- Overall (for the full study sample), Hillsborough's learning communities program did not have a meaningful impact on students' academic success.
- Corresponding to the maturation of the learning communities program, evidence suggests that the program had positive impacts on some educational outcomes for the third (fall 2008) cohort of students.

These results represent the first in a series of impact findings from the Learning Communities Demonstration. Results from the other five demonstration sites will be released in the next several years, providing a rich body of experimental research on the effectiveness of various learning community models in the community college setting.



## Preface

Hillsborough Community College is one of six colleges participating in the Learning Communities Demonstration, a study that is measuring whether different models of learning communities are effective in improving students' academic outcomes. MDRC is leading the evaluation of these programs, as part of its participation in the National Center for Postsecondary Research, a partnership funded by the federal Institute of Education Sciences that also includes the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University.

Like most community colleges, Hillsborough enrolls large numbers of students who are academically underprepared and are therefore referred to remediation. Many students struggle with developmental reading courses that are required for advancement toward a degree or certificate, and ultimately leave college without earning a credential. Learning communities, which are proliferating on college campuses, may be one way to improve students' chances of succeeding in developmental classes and beyond. Learning communities co-enroll small groups of students in thematically linked classes in order to enhance students' engagement with school, increase their understanding of interdisciplinary connections, and strengthen their cognitive skills.

This report, which presents the first impact findings from the demonstration, describes Hillsborough's learning communities and their effects on students' academic outcomes. Hillsborough's learning communities model linked a developmental reading course and a "college success" course. For the full study sample, we found that the program did not have a meaningful impact on students' academic success. However, as the program matured and curricular integration and faculty collaboration increased during the third semester of the program, the evidence suggests that participation in a learning community had a positive impact on some outcomes for the third cohort of students in the study.

Future reports will share findings on the impact of the learning communities operating at the other five colleges participating in the demonstration. The result of this series of reports will be an extensive body of experimental research on the effectiveness of learning communities in the community college setting.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President



## Acknowledgments

The Learning Communities Demonstration has received support from several foundations and government agencies, which are listed at the front of this report. We are grateful for their generous backing and ongoing commitment. We owe special thanks to the U.S. Department of Education for providing the support that led to the creation of the National Center for Postsecondary Research. Major funding for the Learning Communities Demonstration was also provided by Lumina Foundation for Education to support the evaluation and development of the program at Hillsborough Community College under the auspices of the Achieving the Dream Initiative. We also owe thanks to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Robin Hood Foundation, which provided considerable support for this project.

We are grateful to the administrators, instructors, and staff at Hillsborough Community College, who rose to the challenge of developing and expanding a program and participating in a complex research project. It takes courage, time, and effort to subject your program and your institution to the scrutiny of a rigorous evaluation. Space does not permit us to name everyone who has played a role in the study at Hillsborough, but we want to particularly acknowledge some individuals. Judy Alicea, the learning communities coordinator, and Craig Johnson, Vice President for Academic Affairs, worked closely with MDRC and did a terrific job of building up the college's learning community programs, recruiting and supporting instructors, recruiting and enrolling students, and maintaining random assignment procedures. Rachel Singer, from Kingsborough Community College, provided professional development and critical guidance on how to conduct an experiment in the community college setting.

Along with the learning communities coordinator, the learning communities instructors brought the program model to life. They devoted a lot of time and effort to improving students' chances of succeeding in school, and without their hard work this study could never have taken place. We appreciate everyone's willingness to participate in various activities related to the study, including interviews with MDRC staff during numerous campus visits. Finally, we appreciate the help of Nicole Jaguszyn, who provided student records data to MDRC.

Many MDRC staff members have contributed to the Learning Communities Demonstration and to this report. Robert Ivry developed the demonstration, helped design the Hillsborough program, and provided guidance on the study. Thomas Brock provided guidance and feedback throughout the project, serving as a key reviewer of operational issues, analytic decisions, and report writing. John Martinez helped launch the study and worked with Hillsborough to strengthen the program and the random assignment procedures. Leo Yan, Erin Coghlan, and Rashida Welbeck provided critical support in developing, implementing, and

monitoring the random assignment and sample recruitment process. Tom Bailey at the National Center for Postsecondary Research reviewed earlier drafts of this report and provided helpful comments, as did John Hutchins, Lashawn-Richburg Hayes, Dan Bloom, Colleen Sommo, Evan Weissman, and Liz Zachry at MDRC. Hannah Fresques conducted fact-checking. Joel Gordon, Galina Farberova, and Shirley James and her staff developed and monitored the random assignment and baseline data collection process. Kate Gualtieri was our wonderful resource manager. Margaret Bald edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

Finally, we would like to thank the hundreds of students who participated in the study at Hillsborough and, in particular, those who participated in interviews. Many were low-income students striving to get an education, some while juggling work and family responsibilities. We hope that the findings from the study and the other sites in the Learning Communities Demonstration will be used to improve college programs and services for them and others in the future.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

Over the last 40 years, community colleges have played an increasingly vital role in American postsecondary education. Since 1963, enrollment in these institutions has increased by more than 700 percent, with enrollment reaching 6.2 million students in 2006-2007. Each fall, community colleges enroll 35 percent of all postsecondary education students.<sup>1</sup> This dramatic growth is largely due to the fact that community colleges are open-entry institutions and are generally more affordable than four-year colleges and universities. Unfortunately, while enrollments are increasing, overall success rates in community colleges are disappointingly low. Among students who enroll in community colleges with the intention of earning a credential or transferring to a four-year institution, only 51 percent fulfill these expectations within six years.<sup>2</sup> While the rates of degree or certificate attainment are low in general, rates are even lower for students who need developmental education, who comprise a significant proportion of the community college student body.<sup>3</sup>

Given these statistics, community college stakeholders are searching with increasing urgency for approaches with the potential to bolster success rates for community college students, particularly for those who need developmental education. One popular strategy is to create “learning communities,” an idea that has come to describe an array of programs and services offered at community colleges. The most basic learning community model simply co-enrolls a cohort of students into two classes together. Proponents believe that when students spend time together in multiple classes they are more likely to form social and academic support networks that in turn help them persist and succeed in school. More comprehensive learning communities include additional components: They co-enroll a group of students in multiple classes, the courses have thematically linked curricula, instructors collaborate closely both to align their curricula and to support students, teaching includes project-based and experiential learning experiences, assignments and readings are integrated, and student services such as enhanced advising and tutoring can be embedded.

This report presents results from a rigorous study of a basic learning communities program operated at Hillsborough Community College in Tampa Bay, Florida. Hillsborough is one of six community colleges participating in the National Center for Postsecondary Research’s (NCPR) Learning Communities Demonstration.<sup>4</sup> The demonstration’s focus is on determining

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<sup>1</sup>Provasnik and Planty (2008).

<sup>2</sup>Hoachlander, Sikora, and Horn (2003).

<sup>3</sup>Adelman (2004); Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006); Duke and Strawn (2008).

<sup>4</sup>MDRC, in partnership with the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College, the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and faculty at Harvard University, created the NCPR through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Several foundations provided  
(continued)

whether learning communities are an effective strategy for helping students who need developmental education.

Hillsborough's basic learning community model linked a developmental reading course and a "college success" course with the intention of improving the outcomes of academically-underprepared students in particular. Hillsborough developed this program as part of its involvement in Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, an initiative designed to help community colleges make better use of their own data to help students succeed. Hillsborough came up with the model after seeing low success rates for students in developmental courses and higher success rates for students who took a college success course. Learning communities offered the possibility of leveraging the skills acquired in the college success course to assist students who were doing poorly in developmental courses.

The learning communities study at Hillsborough is based on an experimental design in which, from fall 2007 to fall 2008, three cohorts of students in need of developmental education were randomly assigned to either a program group, whose 709 members had the opportunity to participate in learning communities, or to a control group, whose 362 members received the college's standard services. The impact of the learning communities program is estimated by comparing the outcomes of program and control group members using student transcript data collected during the year after random assignment. This report is the first in a series of reports presenting impact findings from the Learning Communities Demonstration.

In summary, the key findings from this report are:

- **The most salient feature of learning communities implemented at Hillsborough was co-enrollment of students into linked courses, creating student cohorts.** Faculty and students suggested that this course structure and the formation of student cohorts increased social linkages among students, a key element of the learning community experience.
- **The learning communities program at Hillsborough became more comprehensive over the course of the study.** Curricular integration and collaboration between faculty members teaching in paired courses are considered a key element of comprehensive, strong learning communities. At Hillsborough, curricular integration and faculty collaboration were generally minimal at the start of the study (as planned), but increased over time.

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additional support to the Learning Communities Demonstration: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Robin Hood Foundation.

- **Overall (for the full study sample), Hillsborough's learning communities program did not have a meaningful impact on students' academic success.** With respect to total credits earned, students in the program group and the control group performed about the same during the program semester and the first postprogram semester. In addition, during the two semesters following the program, students in the program group and the control group registered for courses at around the same rate (that is, their rates of persistence were similar).
- **Corresponding to the maturation of the learning communities program, evidence suggests that the program had positive impacts on some educational outcomes for the third cohort of students.** During the program semester, the program group students who enrolled in learning communities in fall 2008 (the third and final cohort) earned more credits than their control group counterparts. In the semester following the program, the third cohort's program group students registered at a higher rate than their control group counterparts. Readers are advised that when the impacts of the third cohort of students are compared with the impacts of the first and second cohorts, the differences generally are not statistically significant. This indicates that the results for the third cohort should be viewed with caution. Since program maturation was observed at several learning community demonstration sites, analyses will be conducted in future reports to see if there is common improvement in later cohorts.

Notably, this report presents findings from only one of the colleges in the demonstration, which operated one learning communities model. The six colleges taking part in the national Learning Communities Demonstration were selected, in part, because they represent various learning community models. Hillsborough's model was more basic than some of the other colleges' models in the demonstration. In order to better understand the effectiveness of learning communities more broadly, it will be essential to see whether more comprehensive, robustly implemented learning communities yield positive impacts. In addition, the growth and improvement of Hillsborough's program as it scaled up was a pattern exhibited at the other Learning Communities Demonstration colleges. It will also be interesting to see whether more mature versions of the programs tested at the other colleges will similarly yield more positive impacts.

In designing the Learning Communities Demonstration, NCPR was seeking to better understand whether learning communities are an effective strategy to help improve students' chances at succeeding in community college. During the next several years, NCPR will report impact findings from the other five colleges as they become available. The result will be a

significant body of experimental research on the effectiveness of learning communities in the community college setting.

## **RELATED PUBLICATIONS ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

*Scaling Up Learning Communities*

*The Experience of Six Community Colleges*

NCPR, 2010. Mary G. Visher, Emily Schneider, Heather Washington, Herbert Collado.

*Case Studies of Three Community Colleges*

*The Policy and Practice of Assessing and Placing Students in Developmental Education Courses*

*An NCPR Working Paper (National Center for Postsecondary Research)*

NCPR, 2010. Stephanie Safran, Mary G. Visher.

*The Learning Communities Demonstration*

*Rationale, Sites, and Research Design*

*An NCPR Working Paper (National Center for Postsecondary Research)*

NCPR, 2008. Mary G. Visher, Heather Washington, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Emily Schneider, with Oscar Cerna, Christine Sansone, Michelle Ware.

*A Good Start*

*Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College*

MDRC, 2008. Susan Scrivener, Dan Bloom, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, Colleen Sommo.

*Building Learning Communities*

*Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration at Kingsborough Community College*

MDRC, 2005. Dan Bloom, Colleen Sommo.

*Learning Communities and Student Success in Postsecondary Education: A Background Paper.*

MDRC, 2005. Derek V. Price, Malisa Lee.

NOTE: All the publications listed above are available for free download at [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org)





